

Book Review of 'Silence in Politics: Essays' by Alexandra Petrescu

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“Silence in Politics. Essays”
(in Romanian: “*Tăcerea în politică. Eseuri*”)
by Alexandra Petrescu

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Alexandra Petrescu is a young Romanian political analyst and writer. She holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Bucharest (Romania), a M.A. in Comparative Politics from the same university and a D.E.A. in Political Science from the Free University of Brussels (Belgium), working currently as a Postdoctoral Researcher Affiliated with the “Sexuality and Gender Studies” Research Network at the University of Birmingham, UK. Her writings cover a quite large area, from poetry (“*Rhetorical palpitations*”, 2009), to political essays (“*Silence in Politics. Essays*”, 2011), and from political diary (“*Feminist Diary.Paris, 1920-1933*”, 2011) to political analysis (“*The Woman in the Political Imaginary*”, 2008). Very early during her doctoral studies, Petrescu became interested in feminism, gender and in the social mentality studies with regard to women discrimination. She published intensively about mentality of gender discrimination and its relationship with the political power.

Petrescu’s book, “*The Silence in Politics*”, is a collection of twenty-two essays about Silence and Politics. Each of these essays pairs two, apparently opposite, terms of social expression: ‘silence’ and ‘politics’. As a matter of fact, beyond this paradox of pairing what apparently cannot be paired, at least not in the real politics, each essay seems to address the issue of political attitude as the true subject. Each

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essay either describes, explains, models a political attitude or, on the contrary, discovers or constructs a political attitude by combining *usual* and *unusual* perceptions, images and thoughts. In either case, 'silence' is opposed to several fundamental political concepts: language and communication, action and strategy, symbols and goals, power and status, authority and choice. The book is interesting for this very special perspective over politics, in general, and over political attitudes, in particular. These perspectives address the three-level design of this book: the concept, the paradigm, and the style. The particularity of this design is that it makes the book appear as a piece of exquisite analysis of what 'silence' might mean if used to replace, to complement or to create politics anew.

As a conceptual approach, the collection of essays is a history of ideas which connects past and present in a kind of (oftenly) surprising "shortcut" line. Each essay looks like walking through the ages: time and space are compressed to the abstract frames of reminders and thoughts. As a piece of political philosophy, each essay takes the notion of "silence" as a term of comparison with all its opposites deriving from an apparently simple mirroring exercise. However, as the mirror returns an image of the real, so does the book itself - it only returns images of what "silence" does or does not as opposed to "word", "action", or "status" ("*Silence' Stances*").

As it concerns a theoretical paradigm, the Book reminds me the Pre-Socratics model of the opposition of contrary principles. In the ancient Greek philosophy, the Pre-Socratic view of the opposite contraries is deeply connected with the ideas of 'motion' and 'generation'. Though Petrescu's book is not about the ancient Greek philosophy, it is nevertheless strongly connected to this old idea: the opposition of contraries. The idea appears to be fundamental from at least one point of view: it serves to rather suggest than merely describe, to rather convey than direct, to rather construct than just select a pair of meanings aimed at providing a third one, essentially unusual, surprising, but still nothing else than just common sense meaning. Looks like a paradox, but it is actually the 'paradoxe' that provides the conceptual basis on which each essays is actually building upon. In each essay the term of 'silence' is paired, in turn, with all its contraries in a quite systematic procedure: if "silence" is taken as an equivalent of "non-communication", then it is paired with its contrary on the very dimension of "communication": the "word". The result? – Silence proves a stronger power of communication than the word itself. The explanation starts from the idea of opposition and ends up by proving a convergent or a complementary ability to convey meanings which otherwise would require too many words to express what non-words actually do better. And so the words loose their communication power by way of comparison with what they actually are not, namely 'silence'. From this clash between contrary principles, the searched meaning is built up anew. It is this way that we get (unexpected) explanations of some well-known, old concepts like "electoral success", "power" or "war" from contemporary contexts in which 'silence' is assumed to play an essential explanatory role.

As an operational paradigm, each essay manipulates the term 'silence' in order to force the reader realise or dismiss, accept or reject some current stance of contemporary politics either by constructing or by destructing one of its usual, common meanings. It is this way that 'silence' might get the meaning and play the role of what, in the order of the common sense, it is not: a "language", "strategy" or "action". Since in the order of the common sense, 'silence' is taken to mean "lack of communication", "absence of strategy" or even "impossibility of action", it thus becomes a term of reference for many paradoxal situations, conclusions or effects. Moreover, 'silence' is a paradox by itself since, as the Author reminds us David Le Breton's syntagma, it cannot be separated from the 'word' itself. The role it plays as a reference term is that of explaining by opposition. When comparing terms, they should share something and eventually include each other in a common world. When opposing terms, they should not share anything. Actually, each one should exclude the other from the current world. We thus learn, step by step, that 'silence' could help either including or excluding something in- or from the current world, respectively. As operator of either inclusion

or exclusion, 'silence' works as a conceptual tool, used by the constructivist social and political paradigms. It helps both the individual and the society itself explaining what cannot be explained by usual paradigms. Going for the paradox of communication, 'silence' explains why *homo comunicans* exists at all ("*The Silent Politician?*"). Going for the paradox of the individual behavior as deeply rooted in the collective or social behavior, 'silence' thus explains why *homo ludens* never dies ("*Homo Ludens (politicus)*"). Going for the paradox of politics, 'silence' succeeds in explaining why *homo politicus* never changes its fundamental condition ("*Is Internet a public sphere?*" and "*The Dictatorship of Silence*").

This rather philosophical, stylistically and literary elegant, though very difficult and unusual procedure is employed in systematically constructing a real picture of the world. However, not a picture of "*what it is*", but a picture of "*how it is*". This explanatory and profound perspective is what exactly makes the book interesting, since it succeeds to re-construct stereotypes by simply making the opposite contraries working. Put at work, the contrary principles start generating unexpected results. For instance, In the essay "*The 'Anti-politician'/'Anti-politics' Campaigns*", 'silence' help explain why constituencies sometimes vote for ridiculous candidates (otherwise, a very common subject if one looks at the research articles of other Eastern European authors, like Armano Srblijinovic (Srblijinovic 2011, 2012)).

The question which arises is, obviously, why would this book be considered able to convey a theoretical perspective over political attitude research and social mentality studies?

Although separated and apparently unconnected, the essays are actually building up a milieu of social mentalities and political attitudes which finally prove to be not only united in a single conceptual body, but also able of unifying ideas in a clear, profound conceptual framework. Viewed from the perspective of political attitude theory, the essays build up a philosophical explanatory perspective over the processes of formation and change of political attitude. Subjected to political power and cultural environment, the political attitude becomes a continuously constructed output which is simultaneously known and surprising. This construction is as much dependent of the cultural stereotypes, values and norms which are highly resistant to change as it is dependent on the ever changing, paradoxal milieu of day-to-day social preferences and choices, spontaneous conflict or aggregation, deliberated separation or agreement. Each of these stereotypes is investigated both as a social mentality, and as an emergent output of highly dynamical, unstable and complex political processes. More than a psycho-social construct, the political attitude is explained as a cultural construct, subjected to influences rooted in both social and political aspects of the society. Each and every theoretical structural component of a political attitude is extracted from this game of pairing contraries and make them work one against the other in rather common scenarios: communication, norms and values, knowledge or behavior. In each framework, the fundamental term – 'silence' - is opposed to another fundamental term. For example, on a dimension of communication, 'silence' is opposed to 'word'. On a dimension of social or political behavior, 'silence' is opposed to 'action'. On a dimension of social mentality with regard to gender discrimination, 'silence' is opposed to 'prejudice'. Attitudes come up as emergent outcomes from such scenarios of contraries pairing, since they are built up freshly at each instance. This constructivist perspective is much closer, as a conceptual paradigm, to the complexity approach on political attitudes, in opposition with the structuralist approach.

The opposition of contrary principles thus become a generative kernel of attitudes viewed as mind sets, body states&actions and thinking processes. This approach thus provides an unexpected clue over the roots of both the complexity-based and the structural-based perspective over attitude research. This helps not only in developing various modeling views, but first and foremost in supporting the view that the literature on political attitudes, either as fiction or philosophy, is sometimes far ahead the paradigms of theoretical and experimental research. This is one reason for which this book is not just interesting, but really challenging for the political attitude and mentality research: it shows not *what* the actor and the world

of politics actually are, but *how* they actually look like, *how* they behave, change mind, win or loose, and, in general, *how* are they perceived by all of us.

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